



**ICS Occasional Paper Series**

**Volume 5, Number 2**

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June 2014

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# **Latin American Migrants and the Larrikin Principles: Reflections on the Convergence of Cultural Values**

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## **Abstract**

What Latin American migrants regard as common sense and cultural logic are shaped by the processes by which language and cultural behaviours are learned, used and changed in everyday life in their countries of origin. In the 'new' society, these complexities are ignored and imagined in simplistic ways represented by stereotyped "surface culture". In this paper, I analyse how Latin American migrants see the values attached to their cultures and native languages, and their convergence or divergence with others' cultural values within the Australian context. I emphasise the relevance of migrants' culture as a resource that multicultural Australian organisations have, even if it is not recognised. As a Mexican migrant in Australia, I reflect on my own experience to ask how our native cultures shape our behaviours as members of organisations in which we work, socialise and negotiate our cultural values and identities. Through autoethnography, I explore the process of cultural transformation under migration situations by referring to two interrelated cultural levels, "surface culture" and "deep culture", as central to understanding the complexities of cultural imaginings. Through this distinction I explore paradoxical feelings that emerge during the process of involvement in the migrants' new environment.

**Keywords:** Cultural logic, migration, informal practices, organisation, Latin America

## **Introduction**

This paper explores how Latin American migrants, like me, see the values attached to their identities and cultures and the convergence or divergence with others' cultural values in the Australian context. As a Mexican migrant in Australia, I reflect on my own experience to ask how our native cultures shape our behaviours as members of organisations in which we work, socialise and negotiate our identities. Identities, from the country of origin and those from the country of destination, involve multiple and seemingly contradictory representations shaped by both superficial and deep cultural imaginaries. To address the complexities of the cultural imagining of identities, I analyse the role of culture referring to two interrelated cultural levels, "surface culture" and "deep culture" (Bonfil, 1987b). Through this distinction I explore



paradoxical feelings that emerge during the process of involvement in the migrants' new environment.

Using an autoethnographic approach (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Coronado, 2009), I emphasise the relevance of the “deep culture” of migrants as cultural resources of multicultural Australian organisations. Even if not recognised as such, or in some cases openly rejected on ideological grounds, these values are embedded in the way people from different cultural backgrounds operate in their workplaces. As the basis for my argument, I will refer to my own experience, reflecting on the meanings of cultural values and representations that I have encountered in my everyday life. I explore how being a Mexican and Latin American in my country of origin is redefined as I became Australian. To explore further the tensions that I perceive in the intercultural contexts in which I interact, I will also draw on stories from other Latin American migrants in Australia. These were collected for the research project, *Cross-cultural Larrikins in a Neo-liberal World. Ideology and Myth in Postmodern Australia, Mexico and Brazil* (Hodge, Coronado, Duarte, Teal, 2010)<sup>1</sup>.

The research project focused on informal practices deployed in different organisations (such as government offices, universities, insurance companies, factories, and childcare centres) to solve problems created by bureaucracy and managerialism, the ideology which regards management and control as universal ways of organising, irrespective of their objectives. This ideology is strongly influenced by American cultural values and is assumed to be the ‘right’ way to do things, superior to all alternatives (Parker, 2002). The project research objectives were different to my aim in this paper, but the stories collected threw some light on issues of Latin Americans' cultural strategies to adapt to the Australian environment, and their imagined contribution to their workplaces. By exploring my own and others' experiences, I do not claim that they are representative of the Mexican or Latin American communities. In the same way that Cohen points out the importance of idiosyncratic stories, the experiences that I reflect on are “both unique and typical and as such reveals some of the complexities of the migratory experience itself” (2004: 130).

### **Surface culture and the exotic: complex dynamics of cultures and identities**

Initially when I investigated how Mexicans and other Latin Americans are represented in Australia, I found that the imaginary is full of stereotypes or, at best, folklore representations of what I regard “surface culture”. I propose this concept to refer to a diversity of cultural practices in all cultures, which are variable realisations from common cultural values integrated into “deep culture”. “Deep culture” carries principles and worldviews that have emerged from the dynamics of what Bonfil (1987a) conceptualises as the “cultural matrix”. According to Bonfil, cultures are

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<sup>1</sup>This project was funded by the Australian Research Council. The researchers involved were Bob Hodge, Gabriela Coronado, Fernanda Duarte and Greg Teal. The stories included in this paper formed part of a larger corpus from the research project. In the project we collected approximately 100 stories on the experiences of Australians, Mexicans and Brazilians in their workplaces, both in Australia and in their countries of origin.

products of historical processes, changing while simultaneously maintaining their identities. This general process involves transformations in which meanings and practices at the deep and surface level are generated out of the cultural matrix (*matriz cultural*)<sup>2</sup>. In Bonfil's terms, the cultural matrix integrates and gives a sense of continuity to changing cultural practices. It is the generative power through which common cultural meanings are transmitted to following generations. At the same time, it is the source of how culture is transformed to respond to the changing conditions and cultural needs of society.

From this dynamic process, diverse cultural practices emerge as responses to historical, political and social intra- and intercultural dynamics. Some of these practices are shared by multiple groups; others are used in circumscribed contexts identified with local social, political and cultural needs. In the immigrant context, when specific cultural practices are identified as representative of a culture and are brought into new social contexts, they are re-signified, losing all or part of their original meaning and acquiring other meanings that are usually not fully under the cultural control of cultural agents. In these situations, it is possible to see those practices as "surface culture", partially or largely disconnected from the deep cultural meanings. This process is not unique to conditions of transnational cultural mobility, but I will focus here on how this process happens in the specific case of migration.

Surface culture in the countries of destination includes re-signified behaviours associated with public and ceremonial life in the countries of origin. Those behaviours are, in fact, part of the original culture and carry meanings through their practice, but when in the country of destination they are located away from their context and their deep meanings are ignored, easily becoming overgeneralisations and stereotypes. Migrants in general and, in this case Mexicans and Brazilians, are continuously exposed to the removal of the deep meaning of their cultural practices and become misrepresented by the surface image. This feeling was expressed by one of the storytellers from the *Larrikin* research project, "Mexican? They See You with a Face of Tequila and Fiesta".<sup>3</sup> Some of these simplistic classifications are associated with particular countries, but are applied in stereotypical ways to other Latin American cultures whose significant cultural behaviours are ignored.

During my time living in Australia, I have noticed that the most obvious representations of Mexico for Australians from different cultural backgrounds are the Mariachi or *charro* costumes (especially the elaborate *sombrero*), so-called Mexican food (actually Tex-Mex), and Tequila and Margarita. Media advertisements mostly represent Mexican culture as exotic. Recently, a Mexican character, a masked wrestler<sup>4</sup>, appeared in an advertisement for Doritos on Australian television. I will use this example to illustrate the cultural flows from deep to surface culture. It is not my intention to provide an exhaustive understanding of this cultural practice in Mexico;

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<sup>2</sup>In Spanish the word *matriz* can refer to the English words matrix or womb. In this case I use the word 'matrix' as it relates to the Latin root common to both languages: *matrix*, *matricis*: source, origin, and *mater*, *matris*: mother, place or medium where something is developed, (OED 2001-2012).

<sup>3</sup>Project number MexOZ081105. All quotes from interviews in Spanish are my translations.

<sup>4</sup>See videos at <http://mumbrella.com.au/mexican-wrestler-and-thai-kick-boxer-face-off-in-doritos-battle-of-the-flavours-47339>. Last accessed: 18 January, 2014.



rather, I will point out how cultural meanings between Mexican culture in Mexico and surface culture in Australia are transformed.

Wrestling has been very popular in Mexico for as long as I can remember. My grandfather used to go to “*la lucha libre*” (the free fight) when I was a child. This popular entertainment in Mexico, and its promotion in films and TV, has been identified by Fernandez Reyes (2004) as an attempt to create identity icons to deal with the changing culture and identity resulting from the modernisation of Mexican society. Some wrestlers became very famous, but the one who can be regarded as a superstar is *El Santo* (The Saint), also called the *Enmascarado de Plata* (Silver Mask). He was also the protagonist in fifty-three popular films (from 1958-1982) in which he fought against evil forces (Carro, 1984). According to Mego (2007), El Santo can be regarded as the only Latin American hero on a global scale. The status of wrestling has changed since then, and has also become popular outside Mexico.

In Mexico City, it has gone from being mass popular entertainment to something that is fashionable. It has started to attract young members of the high-middle class, who take risks mixing with the masses in neighbourhoods that are regarded as dangerous. This transformation evidently involves a re-signification of meaning that, in my view, already involves change from deep culture to surface culture. Wrestling fashion is also indicated by the commercial success of associated products that are sold everywhere, from Mexican markets to international shops. For example, in 2009 I found a toy wrestler in an Australian supermarket (see Figure 1). In this case he has a clear mark of Mexicanness, the shield from the Mexican flag. His name is *Loco Estupendo/Super Crazy*, written on his back in both languages.



Figure 1: Wrestler toy from an Australian supermarket

Since wrestling in Mexico is linked to the everyday culture of extensive sectors of Mexican society, it is reasonable to assume that there are significant cultural meanings associated with it. Like other ritualistic practices, it carries semiotic messages that can be connected with cultural values and linked to other cultural behaviours. According to Levi, *lucha libre* as a cultural performance represents a set of symbols associated with other aspects of Mexican culture and politics. In her own words, “lucha libre makes sense because it is a performance genre that draws on and reproduces a series of contradictions that are broadly intelligible in the context of the shared historical and cultural background of its Mexican fans” (2008: xiii).

I also suggest that its acceptance and popularity might be linked with another important Mexican cultural practice: traditional dances. In some rural Indigenous and Mestizo<sup>5</sup> communities, dances play an important role in ritual and socio-political life, and many represent symbolic struggles (for example, the dance of Moors and Christians, Warman, 1972; also Coronado 2003). Performances include the use of masks with archetypal representations of good and evil. The significance of masks in Mexican culture is also pointed out by Levi (2008). In broad terms, the appropriation of wrestling into Mexican culture coincided with extensive rural migration to Mexico City (Fernandez Reyes, 2004), suggesting that wrestling incorporated meanings from dances and brought them to the new urban life. That is, what appears on the surface in this new cultural phenomenon actually carries traditional meanings.

When cultural representations are taken outside of their cultural context, their semiotic significance may be altered or lost. The meanings assumed by the specific culture are excluded and other meanings are given to it, then becoming a detached surface culture, as can be seen in the above-mentioned advertisement for Doritos in Australia, where a green Mexican wrestler appeared as a character. This character was shown on TV (viewed in May-June, 2011) as part of a competition in which consumers were asked to decide which flavour to select for a new product. The advertisement included a fight between a Thai fighter and a Mexican wrestler. The competition was called the ‘Battle of the Flavours’, between ‘Hot Mexican Salsa’ and ‘Thai Sweet Chilli’. Simultaneously, the home page of the company’s website included a focus on the competition (Doritos website, n/d). The representation of the two characters can be seen as exotic constructions using surface culture from their countries of origin. In this case I will focus on the representation of Mexicanness in the commercial.

The advertisement brings together two typical representations of Mexico (wrestling and food) and of how Mexican culture become surface culture and then stereotyped within the Australian context. Representations are not only caricatures but bring in other meanings to influence acceptance or rejection of the products. The webpage included more detailed information, as well as video clips that reveal meanings carried in the marketing campaign as a whole. I only include a fragment associated with the imaginary of Mexican culture and identity to illustrate the re-signification of surface culture:

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<sup>5</sup>In Spanish, the term ‘Mestizo’ literally means a mix of Indigenous and Spanish origins. However, in rural regions it is used to denote no Indigenous heritage. In generic terms, Mexicans who are not identified as Indigenous are regarded as Mestizos.



Ladies and gentlemen, it's Doritos' Battle of the Flavours. In the green corner, we have Hot Mexican Salsa. In the red corner, Thai Sweet Chilli. Two new flavours, one's hanging around and the other's going down. To ensure a good clean battle, you decide which flavour wins and stays on shelf. How good is this? Buy these two new Doritos flavours, taste them, and then tell us which one is best and you can win big time. It's like you're a professional Doritos taster. ... It's a battle right? So there's going to be lots of great battling action. You bet. Instruct El Macho to kick Thai-phoon and he will. Instruct Thai-phoon to nipple-cripple, wedgie or a punch El Macho and he will happily oblige. You name it; they'll do it. But it gets better, because while they do the battling, you do the winning. Come up with battle moves that we haven't filmed.... Think big moves, funny moves or totally stupid moves; the more entertaining the better. (Doritos, n/d)

I saw the advertisement again in August 18, 2011 and felt relieved that El Macho, the Hot Mexican Salsa, was defeated, even though some video clips still caricatured him in defeat and did not make the image of the Thai wrestler less ridiculous by being the champion. As a Mexican migrant in Australia, I felt sad, embarrassed with the idea of my culture, my origins, being denigrated in public. I would prefer those stereotypes to go away<sup>6</sup>. Such misrepresentations of national identities are commonly extended to refer indiscriminately to Latin Americans as a whole, who are often homogeneously associated with exotic surface culture: Fiesta, Salsa music, Latin sensuality, Carnival, all of it very “colourful”, including ‘the machos’ who are supposed to be involved in those cultural practices. De-contextualising meaningful cultural practices from their source countries and extracting the deep meanings associated with them is at the heart of post-colonialist ways of expropriating the cultures of the “Other” (Said, 1978). These cultural misrepresentations create expectations about cultural behaviours that are far from what migrants experience in their countries of origin, and are not meaningful in their new environment either.

### **From Mexican migrant to Latin American Aussie**

As a migrant, I find it difficult to come to terms with the tensions between my old and new Mexican and Latin American identities in Australia. I find myself confronted with new ways in which my old identities were different, and make different sense outside my home country. To be Mexican in Mexico was just taken for granted. No one expects others to be the same. Besides which, the more salient aspects of our identities are our regional, ethnic and class idiosyncrasies. For instance, in Mexico I am identified as a *Chilanga*, from Mexico City itself, and see my identity as different to those of citizens from other Mexican cities. This identity is different again to that of rural Mexicans, who identify themselves as more or less Indigenous and belonging to different ethnic groups, each with distinct cultural practices.

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<sup>6</sup>Even if it is common to use jokes in advertisements and some might just see this as an innocent joke, in intercultural contexts to use jokes on other cultures is highly risky and might hide chauvinist sentiments.

Latin American identity also varies from region to region. The fact that we come from Latin American countries does not always mean that everyone ‘uses’ Latin American identity and, even if we do, our identification with it has changed over time. Like all identities, Latin American identity is very complex. I felt more Latin American in the seventies when protest music spread to Mexico from struggles against dictatorships, or every time the United States openly intervened in any Latin American country. However, at the same time we also have problems regarding each other’s national identity; and there are conflicts carried over from our histories and lives in the Americas. Between and within our countries, cultural ways are diverse. We move continuously between being proud Latin Americans and nationalists, critical of other Latin American peoples. We also find common customs and behaviours that formed part of our upbringing and socialisation. In spite of many particularities, we have similar colonial histories and cultural practices from the Iberian Peninsula. We also share a common language, and even though we have different dialects, can easily communicate with each other. At a deep level the language is shared, even between Spanish and Portuguese, which are cognate languages. This means that even when we speak different languages, we can find bridges to understanding through our Romance language background<sup>7</sup>. Finally we share, here and there, our identity as non-Anglos – a strong, albeit negative identity – which carries similar ideological and political histories.

Migration changes imagined identities, which are a combination of our experiences in the past, with how we became Australians, and what we are now. The reasons for migration, what we left behind and our new life in another place, language and culture, create a diversity of ways of being, identifying and behaving (see Duarte, 2005). We feel different from each other, and I often hear myself and others complaining about other Australians seeing us as the same. In similar ways to representations of ethnicity in migrant contexts, we emphasise our differences and tend to ignore our similarities (Jenkins, 1997). Migrating to Australia, I realised that common practices, customs, stories and even phrases that I used to believe were very Mexican, are actually the same in other countries. One example is provided by Cohen (2004: 127) regarding a Salvadoran *dicho* (saying) which I had thought was Mexican.

We may have many cultural differences on the surface but apparently, as Latin Americans, we share a deep culture that we bring into our new lives to relate, understand, communicate and act in the new environment. What we believe about ourselves enters into dialogue with what others expect from us, transforming in unpredictable ways what we become. We construct our new identities in ways of which we were unaware before the intercultural experience. We reflect on the differences and discover behaviours that we believe come from our cultural background, as is illustrated in the next quote, in which one Mexican engineer reflects on the contrast between Mexicans and Anglo-Australians:

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<sup>7</sup> Claimed difficulties of communication between these two languages might be due largely to ideological constraints. Among others, Gumperz (2009 [1958]) argues that lack of intelligibility between cognate languages or dialects can be due to cultural and linguistic ideologies more than linguistic differences.



A Mexican is ingenious by nature, a Mexican searches for alternatives... Here [Australian engineers] make it too structured, inflexibly structured... inflexibility in the sense that “this is how we do it and therefore this is how you will do it” ... We like so much the problem fix, to fix any problem and to get the satisfaction of having solved it. (MexOz141205)

This positive representation of Mexicanness resonates with me, and it appeared expressed in different ways in other stories about how Latin Americans perceive their difference in Australia. The question is: where does this behaviour come from? Is it a cultural feature or an individual trait? If it is cultural, is it part of the deep culture? It is not possible to give a simple answer to such complex questions. Perhaps it is the combination of both, an individual quality influenced by sociocultural histories and by circumstances. Whatever the case, the interpretations given by storytellers emphasise the existence of a characteristic cultural behaviour that they believe is widespread among Latin Americans in Australia, and is a potential contribution to the Australian organisations in which they work. In the next section, I explore the significance of deep culture and language in reflecting on everyday cultural behaviours of Latin Americans in Australia.

### **The pervasiveness of deep culture**

In referring to the complexity of cultural dynamics in the movements between country of origin and country of destination, it is important to see cultures as complex systems which continuously renovate and recreate their meanings (Hannerz, 1992). Paradoxically, the continuous transformations maintain continuity through intimate connections with core cultural principles derived from the cultural matrix (Bonfil, 1987a and b). The link between language and culture as semiotic systems (Geertz, 1987) provides a useful metaphor to refer to the cultural matrix. The cultural matrix can be understood as the grammar of meaning emergence, the basis from which cultural meanings and practices are created, transformed and appropriated by their producers and expropriated or imposed by cultural producers from other cultures (Bonfil, 1987a). The production and reproduction of culture is in itself an intercultural process. Even though the new cultural and linguistic environment influences migrants' cultural systems through multiple interrelations, there is a substratum current that persists. Within it language systems play an important role in the process of making sense of the world and how we relate and communicate with others. Language and culture are interdependent semiotic networks implicated in the generation of a deep cultural logic through language patterns, grammatical structures, semantic classifications and networks with other semiotic codes (Kramsch, 2008a; b). Culture is expressed in the words in use, as well as in broad, complex patterns of meaning, which include cultural values and ideologies (Hodge and Kress, 1993). In a non-deterministic way it is possible to assert that our language, through its grammar and organising logic, shapes us in ways that frame our way of thinking and acting, even if it is not usually part of the daily consciousness of speakers (Whorf, 1956; Vygotsky, 1978).

As migrants, we move into other countries and into the process of living in another culture and language; we are exposed to other forms of organising and decoding meaning carried in the new

language and cultural practices. The persistence of our deep culture/language is strong especially if, as in my case, the second language is acquired late in life. Even if one is incorporated into the life of the country of destination and the second language has become one's main mode of social interaction, the cultural logic carried by the first language and cultural assumptions still prevails. I live in others' language. I speak English thinking in Spanish. I am not referring in this case to the linguistic practice by which speakers begin thinking in their accustomed language, and then literally transfer their meanings into the second language. I am convinced, as Treffers-Daller (2009:63) mentions, that bilingual speakers 'can "turn down" one of their languages, but that they cannot completely "turn off" that language', and I will extend this proposition to culture. In that sense my point concerns the persistent language and culture substrata that shape cognitive processes and forms of sense making. I am not able to demonstrate this assertion, nor how the deep logics of different languages interact and transform each other. In this paper I can only refer to it by reflecting on my uncomfortable feeling that, whatever users of other languages and cultures assume to be logical, such 'common sense' is nevertheless different from what I have taken for granted. One of the storytellers also mentioned a similar feeling regarding rules:

Which rule is stupid is relative. Because maybe one rule that is stupid for me is not stupid for an Australian because they are used to liv[ing] under them, but when ones comes from another country, what one believes is common sense might not be (MexOz 031005).

The relativity of cultural logics brings out the question of how significant are migrants' cultures in the Australian multicultural context, in particular in the workplaces where we spend most of our lives.

### **Migrants' imagined culture and their "wrestling" in Australian workplaces**

One important characteristic of the Australian workplace is its multicultural diversity. Even if policies of multiculturalism have influenced the acceptance of migrant-diverse cultural practices, there are also expectations that their behaviour will conform to the so-called Anglo Australian lifestyle (see Langer, 1990; Hage, 1998). When I began working in Australia I was surprised to discover how cultural differences are invisible – not just in how organisations operate but among migrants themselves. Specific cultural ways are mostly hidden, unspoken, so that we are able to operate in our working days without causing concern to others. At the same time as our cultural difference, especially our deep culture, is made invisible, representations of the surface culture and associated stereotypes are happily reproduced (Stratton and Ang, 1998). In this new environment we migrants tend to mould our cultural behaviours to fit, going with the flow, even hyper-correcting. We try to look more Australian than the Australians, or at least how we imagine the majority of Australians want us to be. This is the view of one Mexican migrant I interviewed, who claimed that 'especially [migrant] women are little perfectionists, they want to be accepted' (MexOz251006).



To my knowledge, there is very little research done regarding the impact of cultural diversity on Australian organisations. The research that provided the stories I am using in this paper is possibly one of the few that has focussed on cross-cultural issues in Australian workplaces. One area of inquiry associated with understanding cultural diversity in workplaces is the sub-field called 'cross-cultural management'. This sub-field is probably the major source of misunderstanding of cultures in the area of Organisation Studies. Despite attempts by critical management studies to offer correctives (Prasad, 2012), cross-cultural management approaches have dominated how cultural diversity is seen in organisations (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 2000; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). In this approach, cultures are usually essentialised, their supposed characteristics overgeneralised and ideologically distorted (see the critique of Hofstede's influential work in Fougere and Moulettes, 2007 and Coronado, 2010; 2012). When cultural differences are emphasised in organisational contexts, they are regarded as a problem (Holden, 2002) and possible similarities are ignored. In fact, recognition of cultural diversity contradicts the assumed best way of managing under managerialism.

Where I work, one symptom I identify as a sign of fear of cultural difference is over-regulation. Excessive control over employees' ways of doing their work through protocols, and explicit or tacit rules and policies, ensures that very little space is left to allow flexible ways of dealing with the complexity of problems encountered to do our jobs. In this process, even though it might be unintentional, cultural creativity is neutralised and excluded. Through excessive bureaucratic processes and micro management, these kinds of organisation operate under one dominant logic, which today corresponds to managerialism. Under this ideology, there is no space for cultural diversity. Other cultures are regarded as irrelevant, if not dangerous. Although managerialism has become dominant in many organisations, in practice these sites operate in more complex ways, with social interactions and cultural diversity shaping everyday working practices. This cultural richness might be invisible or deliberately hidden but it is still part of the way in which multicultural labour operates. So how does this cultural diversity fit with the predominant cultural ways in Australia? As an attempt to answer this question, I reflect on some stories that Mexican and Brazilian Australians told about their intercultural practices in their working life. Drawing on their experiences, they explored differences and similarities between their native cultures and the Australian, in particular Anglo-Celtic culture, and assessed other cultures in terms of the flexibility or rigidity encountered in their work experiences. These qualities were regarded as cultural characteristics, even if they wondered sometimes whether the differences were due to culture or to personality.

Storytellers did not just talk about Anglos or Latin Americans. They included a more diverse cultural experience, reflecting the above-mentioned cultural diversity of Australian workplaces, as well as their memories or imaginaries of the situation in their countries of origin. According to my own and other Latin American experiences, we change our everyday behaviour from that in our native countries when we came to the new country. Some behaviour attributed to our culture is a product of the battle for survival in the country of origin: one breaks the rules as the only way to get things done; one can do that if needed, but will usually only do so if lacking any other means. If not needed, these cultural behaviours can be dormant in the new context, but they



might also become a cultural resource. They are potential skills arising from the migrants' deep culture and might converge with other informal multicultural practices.

Cultural behaviours may be valued differently by migrants in Australia as against their country of origin. In Mexico for example, flexibility is often interpreted as corruption and seen in negative terms. During fieldwork in Mexico it was almost impossible to collect stories in which questions about "informal practices" did not trigger stories that were labelled as instances of corruption. The stories were similar to those collected in Australia, but were labelled differently (Hodge *et al.*, 2011; Coronado, 2008). Two examples in Australia and Mexico referred to the control of photocopies using monthly quotas and how employees managed to overcome the restrictions when the demand was higher and the application of the rule was inflexible. Informal solutions in the Australian context were regarded as flexibility, a proud quality of being Australian, and seen as mostly positive in the stories collected. This was not the case in the Mexican context. Contrasting views about informal practices in different countries underlines the importance of taking context into account, and its effects on cultural behaviour. But across the range of stories from Anglo Australians, Mexicans and Brazilians, it is possible to see commonalities. Flexibility was mostly viewed as positive, in the sense that it allowed for the creativity needed to solve problems, build camaraderie, and to develop trust and collaboration. However, it was also pointed out that such flexibility can be negative when it is used manipulatively to advance oneself or to abuse power.

In the stories, Latin American employees were represented as heroes and imagined themselves and other Latin Americans as the most flexible, while their Anglo bosses were seen as rigid. Some storytellers expressed a sense of affinity with Australian working cultures, which can be associated with other cultural aspects that arise from the past waves of migration conforming to the multicultural character of Australian society (Castles and Vasta, 2004; Hodge and O'Carroll, 2006). Cultural proximity between Latin Americans and Latin European migrants was mentioned, and this might constitute a bridge between Latin Americans and Anglo-Celtic Australians, who are already accustomed to the old migrants' cultural ways. It may explain the findings of similarities between them. Looking for points of convergence between different cultures in Australia, I analysed some stories from Mexicans, Brazilians and Anglo Australians referring to informal practices that they have used. Research participants associated these practices with cultural behaviours that allowed them to solve problems by innovating and breaking/bending rules in order to make Australian organisations work. These cross-cultural storytellers – that is, Australians from different cultural backgrounds – represented themselves as heroes fighting against typical forms of control and rigid rules created by bureaucracy and managerialism. Mexicans and Brazilian Australians saw their heroic behaviour as coming from their cultural origins, while Anglo Australians joked about them as being true Australians, kind of larrikins.

Reflecting on the stories and the claims that those behaviours were coming from their specific cultures, as symbolised by cultural characters such as the *Malandro* in Brazil (see DaMatta, 1991) or, in Mexico, *Super Barrio* (a political activist leader dressed as wrestler – see also Levi, 2008), I found it useful to refer to the archetypical trickster as a form of convergence of these



cultural behaviours. Even if tricksters have particular roles and meanings in each culture, they share common traits that I used to explore cross-cultural behaviours as convergence. Triggered by this reflection, I suggest that some of the informal workplace practices attributed to different cultural backgrounds can be seen to come from deep cultural behaviours common to Latin Americans and Australians. It is outside the scope of this paper to analyse the complexities embedded in different stories and iconic cultural characters. Each cultural hero has deep historical roots and there are ambivalent reactions to them according to different *époques*, social contexts and places. The stories portray some common behaviour connected with what in the research we called ‘the Larrikin Principle’.

### **The ‘Larrikin Principle’**

In the study of informal practices opposing rigid rules, we appropriated the character of ‘the larrikin’ as the Australian representative of the mythical figure of the trickster, an archetype being represented in many cultures as a smart creature that can be male or female, divine, human or animal. The trickster breaks rules and uses deception to survive the dangers of the world (see Jung, 2004; Levi-Strauss, 1963). According to Ballinger (1991-1992, p. 21), the trickster is “... incorrigible, insatiable, deceptive, comic and transforming.... The epithet trickster has also been applied to certain popular culture heroes and Euro-American literary characters as well: the romantic outlaw, the con man and particularly the fictional picaresque”. In the case of our study, trickster heroes were from different cultures, of different genders and age, and emphasise core, deep elements of their cultural behaviour.

The Larrikin Principle refers to deep cultural behaviours that emerge in different cultures to resist forms of domination. In seeking to define the Larrikin Principle as a set of cultural characteristics with a distinctive opposition to bureaucracy, economic rationalism and powerful forms of control, we looked for commonalities across cultures by identifying the Australian Larrikin with Latin American tricksters such as the Mexican wrestler and the Brazilian *Malandro*, outlaw heroes like Ned Kelly, Che Guevara or Subcomandante Marcos, and cultural rule-breaker celebrities like Frida Kahlo or Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter. The representations of these characters as tricksters are useful in pointing to common attitudes and strategies synthesised in the Larrikin Principle as possessing two strands:

One is a distinctive attitude to formal rules and linear authority, affirming the values of informal systems, flexible practices, egalitarianism, loyalty to mates and social justice. The other is a rejection of ‘bullshit’, especially as it emanates from authority figures and props up their exercise of power, damaging in the process all-important dimensions of solidarity and trust (Hodge *et al.*, 2011, p. 229).

These two principles appeared in different forms in the stories related by Mexican, Brazilian and Anglo Australians and were associated with practices culturally acquired in their countries of origin. Obviously, not all stories refer to these cultural practices as positive and not all workplaces were presented as managed by rigid rules.

Essentialised versions of trickster characters and associations with outlaw representations produced some rejection among the research participants. However, there was a predominance of storytellers seeing their larrikinism (*i.e.*, being metaphorically Larrikins, Maladros or masked wrestlers) as heroic opposition to managerialism. As is illustrated by one storyteller, to find ways to oppose paralysing rules is not exclusive to Anglo or Latin American Australians:

... everywhere there are bureaucracies, and where there are bureaucracies, there are stupid rules, and on many occasions they put rules because people abuse [the process], but in the end they fuck the ones that do things properly, because what else can they do to do their work? (MexOz 031005).

However, some stories refer to these principles as typical behaviours imagined as part of their distinctive national cultures. Although organisations reported being differently impacted by managerialism, the stories show a perception of increasing economic rationalism that includes more rigid systems of control. This kind of management style was represented in many stories as the “villains” in both countries, but Mexicans and Brazilians considered these villains in their country of origin worse than in Australia. According to their stories, in the home countries to break rules is a matter of survival and one has to learn how to do it. By contrast, in Australia one only needs to do it sometimes, even though it might then be more difficult to do, and it is possible to use this resource to make things work. This perspective was expressed in a reflection on the use of *jeithino*, the informal Brazilian practice of bending rules:

Let’s say that where there are rules in Australia, it is possible to use *jeithino*. But I notice that the culture is stricter. People [in Australia] don't want to change their schedule, their processes ... And if it takes two weeks for that document to be done, it TAKES two weeks to be done (BrOz211005, original in English).

Similarly the next quote illustrates how having experienced severe difficulties is perceived as being a resource that facilitates the solution to problems:

In Mexico you learn to use something that is designed for something completely different to be able to solve the problem, which has to do with that, with the fact that rules are interpretable.... And also because you have to deal with whatever you have at hand (MexOz21106).

Other stories reinforce the view that, having experienced those problems before and used their cultural resources to solve them, helps migrants to function better in the new context. At the same time, bringing those abilities to a different context also triggers a reflexivity that questions cultural logics that were always taken for granted – both their own and that of the other. Reflecting on my own experience working in both countries has raised my awareness of commonalities between disparate situations, and brings to consciousness the challenges that we migrants face, with the added burden of both using and hiding our distinctive cultural attributes. This external gaze allows migrants to see things differently, adding new insights and putting



cultural resources into practice as contributions in the new environment. In that way, cultural diversity is not regarded as an obstacle to organisational success. On the contrary, it can be considered to be a resource for managing in complex, dynamic and demanding conditions. Unfortunately, the unrecognised use of these cultural practices might also defer the collapse of dysfunctional management systems that claim their success to be based on the efficiency of managerial systems.

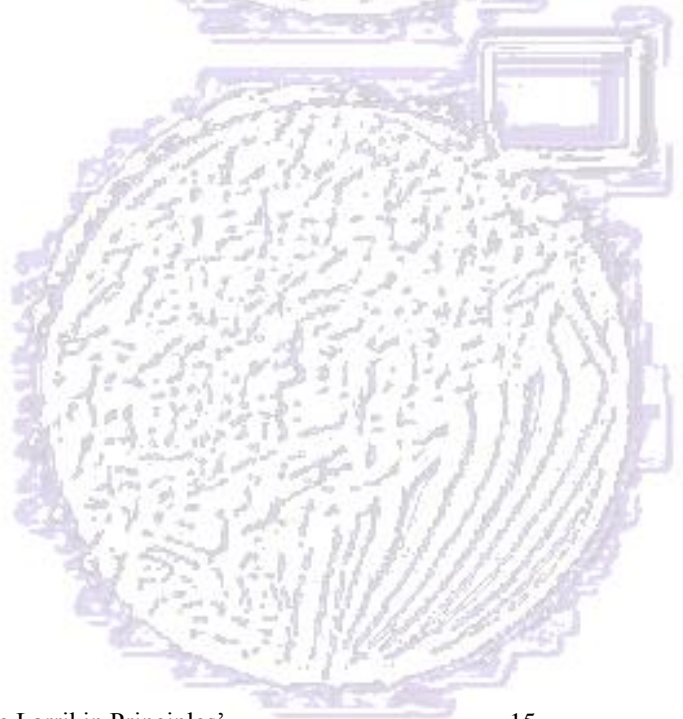
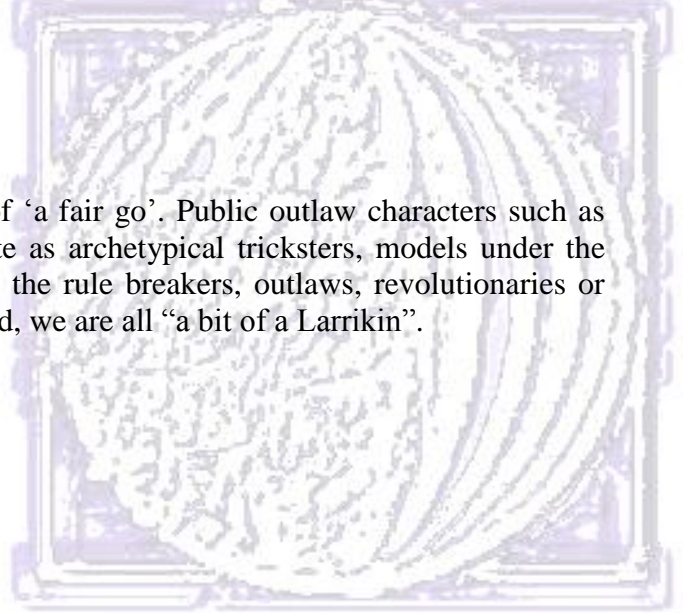
## **Conclusion**

When we – Latin Americans and others – migrate, we enter into a process of co-construction of our identities. In the same way as our cultures are continually changing in our native countries, in the new environment cultures are influenced by the intercultural exchanges in which we are involved. Our cultural behaviours are in flux, as we try to manage differences and similarities within the Latin American cultures that we encounter, and between ours and other migrant cultures in Australia. We transform our identities and cultural practices, and simultaneously keep, to some degree, a sense of cultural control over what we adopt, change and transform. From our cultural matrix, our deep culture, we connect to our cultural past and generate new cultural forms. We continue to be Mexican or Chilean, Argentinean or Brazilian, but of a different kind. We become more Latin American in order to fit into the Australian context and its Latin American imaginary, so that we become more Australian.

In our workplace experiences, the situation seems different. In Australian organisations, cultural diversity is mostly accepted on the surface but emptied of its cultural meanings. Deep cultural behaviours seem to be invisible, irrelevant and even dangerous, needing to be neutralised or excluded. Different migrants' cultural logics, carried via our native ways of sense making through language and everyday cultural practices, are usually ignored by organisations, even though they may, in fact, be important components of existing working practices. Powerful post-colonialist perspectives that regard others' culture as obstacles impact on how organisations deal with cultural diversity. As cultural diversity increases in organisations, so must alternative ways of working. Migrant cultural influence on work processes should be encouraged to challenge and develop current Australian work practices. The stories of cross-cultural tricksters – *larrikin*(a)s in Australia – emphasise the system's need for the invisible contribution of cultural differences to solve problems created by managerialism and its rigid rules. Reflective migrants, evaluating the new environment from a peripheral perspective, can sense the new culture from a different angle, denaturalise it, and add insights from their external cultural logics. This does not mean that other Australians are excluded from this capacity. As we found in most stories, people from all cultures, whether old or new migrants, born here or overseas, have the cultural resources that are needed to see the social world through the lens of the *Larrikin Principle*.

The difficulties created by formal systems of control and regulation, coupled with abuse of power and injustice, generate a need for these qualities in order to survive in workplaces and in the wider society. In this way different cultural practices converge in the character of the trickster. Latin American imaginings of their cultures and identities in Australia converge with

Australians' imagined own culture and identity of 'a fair go'. Public outlaw characters such as Che Guevara, the Zapatistas and Ned Kelly unite as archetypical tricksters, models under the Larrikin principle. They help us to identify with the rule breakers, outlaws, revolutionaries or battlers that organisations need to thrive. In the end, we are all "a bit of a Larrikin".





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